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AT THE BUREAU OF INFORMATION

Her Royal Highness, the Princess Rosalba, could answer every one of *Mangnall's Questions*. To this proof of intelligence were added the beauty obligatory upon a fairy-tale princess and the goodness incumbent upon a downtrodden heroine. But though Thackeray conscientiously emphasizes Rosalba's mental superiority and scornfully gibes at the usurping Angelica's meagre attainments, yet it may be noticed that the conclusion of *The Rose and The Ring* shows the uninformed Angelica and Bulbo quite as happy as the encyclopædic Rosalba and Giglio. When Thackeray wrote, however, it was still customary for educated persons to possess general information, and he merely followed convention when he dowered Rosalba with the *Questions* and Giglio with prizes for Spelling, Writing, History, Catechism, French, Arithmetic, Latin, and Good Conduct.

Everyone in the mid-nineteenth century was prepared for reference emergencies. To-day, on the contrary, we are informed only on matters that have to do with our specialty. We cannot waste time acquiring superfluous knowledge. If we should really need enlightenment, we are aware that predigested, concrete paragraphs await us in various first-aid volumes. We feel no shame because of our superficiality. Rather do we realize that a wide range of information arouses suspicion: "Jack of all trades," someone whispers darkly. So we consciously narrow our work, but deepen it more and more, telling ourselves that the greatest happiness life holds for us is the possibility that some day we shall enjoy with one gnat or one grass stem or one enclitic a closer intimacy than does any other man on earth.

Therefore since knowledge, weighed and measured, stands on the nearest shelf and since the acquirement of elaborate and extraneous information has deleterious consequences, modern pedagogy does not deem it advisable to encumber the mind of the Young Person with unassorted facts. But another time had another manner and the educators of fifty or sixty years ago made Questions and Answers a part of the school-room routine.

In one institution this custom was elaborated into a Friday afternoon function. The First Class, arrayed more gloriously than the colored plates in *Godey's Lady's Book*, stood in two facing lines. One group repeated the questions that had been announced the week before, and the other group answered triumphantly (if they could) and in turn presented inquiries which must be satisfied the next Friday. Each member of the class recorded both question and answer in a special book, and a monthly review, a sort of information-match, prevented any possible dimming of interest in the accumulation of unclassified, unqualified facts. I have one of these books, and a reading of it makes me comprehend why no Who, What, or Where demand of my childhood ever failed to meet with a prompt and definite response. The definiteness of the answers is particularly restful in view of the qualifications, exceptions, and parallels that hedge about any informative statement that I myself give or receive to-day.

Of course, many of the Questions in my amateur *Mangnall* have to do with the usual educational lagniappe: Seven Wonders, quotations, the location of famous buildings. But others are agreeably inconsequent, veritably searching. No Authority is ever given, so I take on trust the replies to a number of interrogatories that have found me unprepared. For instance:—

Whence does the Emperor of Java procure his salt?

When and where was powder for the face first introduced?

What king was fond of oysters?

What did the Emperor Otho do when he met drunkards?

How many letters are there in all of Voltaire's works?

Who was the first person buried in a wooden coffin, of what kind of wood was it made, and when?

What rate of interest was allowed to the Decemviri?

How many forms have the Chippewa verbs?

Who was the first man who had the gout?

Why does artificial curled hair drop out of curl on the appearance of damp weather?

It is possible, of course, that the Young Person would not really be better or happier for the ability to meet quickly and

with modest confidence every chance demand for information. And it is possible, too, that he would lose time from the real business of life if he paused to fix names and dates in his mind. Anyhow, memorizing has gone out. Children understand or absorb or correlate. The feat of reciting the names of the presidents or the kings of England is obsolete. Most formulas are laughed at and it is a brave and independent spirit that admits to a reliance upon "Thirty days hath September," or "A pint's a pound the world around," or—

"A dative put, remember pray,
After *envy*, *spare*, *obey*."

It is interesting, however, to notice that while the contemporary and actual Young Person is allowed to pass through our schools and colleges unscathed by accuracy of reference or comprehension of allusion, yet the fiction Young Person is generously supplied at all points. Among the story makers the General Information convention still persists, for the modern Rosalbas and Giglios make assertions and comments that out-Mangnall Mangnall. Moreover, these young people extemporaneously paint or model or compose novels and harmonies with an expertness that in crude actuality would mean years of concentrated preparation, or the Fairy Blackstick's active co-operation.

Authors, indeed, have always been fond of learned characters, but as a general thing readers have been expected to take alleged scholarship on faith. A reference to near-sightedness or to a slight stoop, an insistence on indifference to money and on absent-mindedness, are quite enough to establish a reputation for academic success. Should the author give his scholar a definite preoccupation—something new in planets or protozoa—the evidence is complete.

A more ingenious way of shirking the presentation of direct testimony is by such a device as is employed in *I Promesso Sposi*. Federigo, Manzoni asserts, is a book-lover: "He not only found time for study but devoted as much to this object as a professor of literature would have required." Furthermore, Federigo produced. "The works remaining from him, great

and small, Latin and Italian, published and manuscript, amount to about one hundred volumes : moral treatises, discourses, dissertations on history, sacred and profane antiquities, literature, arts and various other subjects." Any possible skepticism Manzoni meets with an assurance that he has the proofs at hand. "But they would be many and prolix and what if they should not prove satisfactory? if they should make the reader turn away in disgust? So . . . instead of digressing more at length on the character of this wonderful man, . . . observe him in action. . . ."

But there is sometimes an author who does not shirk. For example: Augusta Evans Wilson. Her casual characters are equipped merely for everyday conversation, and consequently *Anthon's Classical Dictionary* and any comprehensive collection of Norse myths will serve immediate colloquial needs. But a leading lady is specifically trained for intellectual expression. Just think of Edna Earle. Though living on a remote Alabama plantation, she is fortunate in knowing a clergyman who teaches her Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Sanskrit, besides "the application of those general principles that underlie modern science and crop out in ever-varying phenomena and empirical classification." Her earliest literary venture is a vindication of the unity of theologies. "Verily an ambitious programme for a girl over whose head scarcely eighteen years had hung their dripping drab wintry skies, and pearly summer clouds."

That her subject was a feasible one she owed to the "extensive library" at the plantation house and to the "collection of books" at the rectory. Even so, the work was not light: "The delineation of scenes and sanctuaries in different latitudes from Lhasa to Copan, gave full exercise to Edna's descriptive power, but imposed much labor in the departments of physical geography and architecture."

A publisher quite unreasonably returns the manuscript, but asks for some short articles. Generously, Edna sends him two: *Who Smote the Marble Gods of Greece?* and *Keeping the Vigil of St. Martin Under the Pines of Grutli*. Later the repentant publisher requests the return of *The Unity of Theologies*, and its best-selling and remunerative popularity made Edna "a pet

with the reading public . . . and relieved her from the necessity of teaching." Her last book is *Shining Thrones of the Heart*, dedicated "to my countrywomen who reign there." That this extraordinarily successful work had no successor is the fault of St. Elmo Murray. With the last words of the marriage service, his bride collapses and remains unconscious for two hours. As soon as she revives he declares to her with something of his sadly diminished fire and egotism:—

"To-day I snap the fetters of your literary bondage. There shall be no more books written. No more study. . . . And that dear public you love so well must even help itself and whistle for a new pet. You belong solely to me!"

But though authors are still disposed to dower a leading man or woman with varied information they are equally inclined to denude a plot and a background of helpful explanation. A writer limits himself; he specializes in temperament. Hence one emotion, well analyzed, suffices for a book. Indeed, it is not easy to "tell" the well-written modern novel. "Oh," we say gropingly, "it is a study of foiled ambition"; or "it presents a new view of irresponsibility." And usually we add: "You must read it yourself, and carefully, to appreciate the delicacy of the conception, the orientation of an exceptional personality, the intimacy of experience"; and so on.

Excision, of course, makes for improved technique: from it is born our modern pride, the short-story. But sometimes a mundane reader, having finished a single-impression work, is irritably conscious of gaps in the narration. He feels as if he had been listening to a person who spoke only when he had something to say. Especially do last chapters produce gnawing curiosity in the mind and heart of that mundane reader: Did He die? or come back? or succeed? Did She do it? or make it? or get it? And, most of all, did They marry?

Now it may be that the books of yesterday went to the other extreme. Trollope scorned to leave the reader in any doubt regarding Mrs. Proudie's executive ability, or the Duke of Omnium's profits and losses. Bulwer conceals nothing that touches Pisistratus Caxton; Charles Lever could never be accused of economy of incident; Wilkie Collins is not reticent; Charles

Reade makes full confession of time, place, and action; and Scott, Dickens, and Thackeray all strictly observe the rule stated with conciseness and finality by the King in *Alice*: "Begin at the beginning and go on till you come to the end; then stop."

And the day before yesterday was even more generous with story minutiae. Every hero and heroine, for example, was explained genealogically. It is a request for full particulars regarding Evelina's parents and grandparents that opens Miss Burney's "trifling production of a few idle hours"; and we know all details of the cruel fate that pursued the mother of the children of the Abbey—that mother on whose tombstone was recorded the fact that she was "Alike lovely and unfortunate."

Moreover, incidents were elaborated and reiterated. Clarissa and Pamela relate the same incident to several persons who write it to each other and record it in their journals, finally returning the information to Clarissa or Pamela with comments, deductions, and prognostications that make the original matter hardly recognizable. And there is no lack of explanatory detail in *Joseph Andrews* or *Peregrine Pickle* or *Udolpho*. The authors recked little of time and less of space if the imparting of information were concerned.

Of this inclusive practice many pages are, of course, the consequence. Yet, although because of outward seeming, a two-volume nineteenth-century novel may depress and a seven-volume eighteenth-century novel may appal, still I feel that too much story is better than too little. A reader can always skip. And the especial value of this opportunity lies in the fact that it is the reader—not the author—who chooses the place to skip. *A* enjoys historical digressions and scorns flirtatious dialogue; *B* loathes both but thrills over a good fight; *C* skims past everything but character exposition and analysis of motive; while *D* pauses only when a laugh or a sob is possible. The reader alone knows what pleases him in a book. Taste is a personal and illogical quality. I know a circulating library enthusiast who objects to Italian backgrounds and Russian proper names, though she admires certain writers who are addicted to one or the other; a student of fiction-technique who delights in compiling examples of prevalences, deteriorations, and adumbrations;

and I myself confess to a passionate interest in what book-people eat. It is plain, then, that we three could read the same book with pleasure, but it is also plain that each of us would omit a page here and there. But my point is that we should all get something that we wanted.

Now when the author takes it upon himself to do the skipping, only the soul-mate of that author is thoroughly at peace. The mundane reader is annoyed. He may, of course, exert his imagination to fill out all lacunæ. Perhaps this is the result that the author is striving for, desiring, according to accepted theories of bettering the needy, to improve and stimulate the reader without letting him know it. Possibly, too, the elliptical writer is not unwilling to spare himself certain anxieties. Mark Twain tells of piteous struggles to end *Pudd'nhead Wilson*. When in desperation he had disposed of one important character by saying, "Rowena went out in the back yard after supper to see the fireworks and fell down in the well and got drowned," he was so pleased with the succinctness and finality of the statement that he got rid of two boys and two old ladies in the same way. "I was going to drown some of the others," he remarks, "but I gave up the idea partly because I believed that if I kept that up it would arouse attention, and perhaps sympathy with those people, and partly because it was not a large well and would not hold any more anyway."

Some libraries publish, at regular intervals, a list of "Pleasant Books." Two other lists would be helpful: Everything-Complete Books and Framework-Only Books. The mere naming of books has always been a popular means of disseminating information. Classified titles give keen pleasure, blessing him who writes and him who reads: for the compiler has the joy of expressing his personal conviction and the reader has the delight of disagreeing with it. It is safe to say that no one of us has ever glanced over a list of books without feeling outraged at the presence or absence of a particular volume. As a general thing, lists of books concern themselves with the Best Books as predestined for Boys, Girls, Tourists, Self-Makers, or for a proper appreciation of the Panama Canal, Shakespeare, or the Musical Glasses. But *indices expurgatorii* are not unknown. An early and inter-

esting example is that one arranged by Francis Meres who sternly announced a number of Books to Be Censured. The twentieth-century reader learns that the sixteenth-century reader was warned away from Bevis of Hampton, Guy of Warwick, Arthur of the Round Table, Huon of Bordeaux, and like suspicious characters. We realize to-day that to censure a book is to advertise it widely and profitably, and this, judging by the *Stationers' Register*, is what Meres succeeded in doing for the group of ballads and romances he held up to public scorn. We doubt Meres's sincerity as a censor just as we doubt the sincerity of any compiler of a list of books: the opportunity to pose, to interpret the Self, is wellnigh irresistible.

Even as lists of titles bring cheer and satisfaction to some hearts, so do proper names to others. The mention of Places and People may become an obsession. Especially is this true in the case of poets. There are masters of verse whose names bring to some people only a confused and harrowing recollection of efforts to "identify all the allusions and references." Without doubt, the star of such a group is Milton. He abandons himself to the use of proper names with a completeness and prodigality that is nothing short of dissipation. The mundane reader, though panoplied in a working knowledge of the Bible, of mythology, of geography, of mediæval romance, will find his literary armor showing gaps after an encounter with Book I of *Paradise Lost*. And though Horace, Virgil and Ovid, Ariosto, Tasso and Spenser be added to that reader, though his mind hold in solution *The Shorter Catechism*, though he have recourse (according to his generation) to *Mangnall's Questions*, *The Century Dictionary of Proper Names*, or *What Every Child Should Know*, yet will he read Milton in general with helpless suspicion of unreadiness, and Book I of *Paradise Lost* in particular, with hopeless realization of incompetence.

The mere pronounciation of proper names often marks the man. As decorative and declarative as the labels on a steamer trunk is the correct accenting or slurring of München, Firenze, and Napoli; or Pall Mall, Magdalen, and Newcastle; or Spokane, Los Angeles, and New Orleans; while culture and position are

assured by a proper rendition of Carew, Cowper, and Clough ; or Tumulty, Carnegie, and Huerta.

Pronunciation omniscience, however, is not to be encouraged. The man who knows everything about accents and orthoepy is apt to be imbued with a militant and missionary spirit. His conscience does not recognize Ephraim's right to join himself to Dictionary and Usage idols. But it is not only the doctrinaires in information who will not let Ephraim alone : correspondence schools pursue, book agents overtake, libraries allure.

After all, though, library is only a relative term. The word belongs equally to a be-carved and re-frescoed structure, packed with volumes, and to a single book. A library may even be a state of mind. Hardly more was the one I remember most gratefully and clearly. Wide shelves were built across a side of the room, and from my accustomed retreat among the unbound magazines on the top shelf I had a view of the whole world. What the open doors revealed was of no value : just rooms. But the open window disclosed the course of things.

My outlook was framed in a great wistaria that looped and twisted itself up to the roof and then across to the magnolia tree on the banquette beyond. The mossy brick path below the window led around a doll and kitten cemetery, past a rabbit pen, and then to the steps of the back gallery where the kitchen contingent, headed by Aunt Mary, went through fascinating evolutions with egg-beaters, spice pounders, dish-pans, and yellow bowls. Opposite the back gallery, a vegetable garden frankly admitted what city soil and rabbits and chickens can do for corn and okra and butter-beans. Beyond I could see a small, strangely shaped house, a boat intended for stationary land service, and a circus ring of modest diameter. Scattered among these facts of life were trees whereof I might eat the fruit : fig and banana, orange and Japan plum. Against the division fence at the back grew in plain sight four-o'clocks ready for stringing, elephant-ears useful as hats or aprons, Spanish-daggers tabooed as weapons, and china-balls equally tabooed as ammunition.

What more of knowledge is there? Grievous and disappoint-

ing things to bear, good things to eat, exciting things to play, pretty things to look at, gay things to wear, forbidden things to do,—just the information that we seek and test through three score years and ten. And if we know thoroughly and test truly, we shall be as well equipped for Crises and Exceptional Circumstances as was Prince Giglio when he fought King Padella.

“If you ride a fairy horse and wear fairy armor,” complained the justly irritated usurper of Crim Tartary, “what on earth is the use of my fighting you?”

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